

Sword and Shield of the Brass

He Takes the Military Line Against Pentagon Civilians

By Richard L. Lyons
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AT A PENTAGON conference last winter, Rep. L. Mendel Rivers (D-S.C.), new chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, leaned across the table and in his Charleston drawl reminded Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara: "But Mr. Secretary, Carl Vinson's gone. He's gone."

It was Rivers' way of telling the Pentagon that things were going to be different, with the committee out from under the dictatorial control of the old Georgian who had retired after running it forever.

And different they have been. Vinson fought McNamara on some issues, but in general he accepted the idea that McNamara ran the Pentagon—while basking in the legend that he himself still did.

Rivers is the opposite type, banging away at the civilian policymakers for not paying enough attention to Congress and usually siding with the military when a civilian-military disagreement appears. Military men like him because he prefers their views. He has no rapport with McNamara.

A reconstructed Dixiecrat who wears his white hair long on his neck somewhat in the manner of his antebellum hero, John C. Calhoun, Rivers has aggressively fought Pentagon civilian policymakers on one issue after another all year.

Power Moves Downtown

RIVERS REFUSED to discuss his views or philosophy of congressional-administration relations with me. He said The Washington Post had unfairly criticized him. But other committee members who share Rivers' philosophy explained the committee's actions in words that add up to these:

"We're trying to get some cooperation from that arrogant so-and-so McNamara. We want to be taken in on a partnership basis. McNamara won't confide in us and he pays no attention to our recommendations."

That could also be read to mean this: We remember the old days when the generals and admirals came up to tell us what they wanted and we had a piece of the action. Now McNamara runs a one-man show. We're sick of watching power move from the Hill downtown and we're going to dig in and try to get some of it back.

The Hard Line

MANY SENIOR committee members feel that McNamara treats them as less than equals, as did Vinson, who ran the committee as if he were teaching a kindergarten. They bitterly resent what they call McNamara's arrogance, his one-man rule, his refusal to confide in them, and have set out to try to prove that Congress is a co-equal branch and has some power.

Under Rivers, the committee apparently has spiked for now McNamara's plan to merge the reserves with the National Guard. It pushed through a military pay raise twice as high as he wanted. It provoked a veto with a command that McNamara give Congress early warning before closing a military base. It even forbade him to release abandoned Bolling Air Force Base here for redevelopment.

Rivers has irked the Establishment not only by his actions but by his speeches. In Hartford two weeks ago, he sounded the same hard military line—"Victory now"—for which Democrats lambasted Barry Goldwater last year.

But he has struck a responsive chord in the House with the issues he has

picked—particularly on closing bases. McNamara may be a modern miracle in the way he has taken charge of the Pentagon and saved money by closing bases no longer needed. But to a Congressman, one of the few things worse than having a base closed is to be made to look stupid by not having advance notice.

A senior Democrat on Rivers' committee said that he was flying home last November when the Pentagon announced, without immediately naming them, that a number of bases would be closed. He was greeted at the airport by television cameras and was asked what the announcement was all about. He didn't know. And when he called the Pentagon he couldn't find out.

Two weeks ago, the committee learned from the newspapers that Marine and Navy enlistments were to be extended. Rivers said he had written McNamara more than a week before asking whether he planned such an action, but had received no reply.

Rivers called Secretary of the Navy Paul H. Nitze before the committee and told him: "I don't think you have any notion of taking us into your confidence. So we'll just have to play it our way. We're doing pretty well up here."

Rep. Otis G. Pike (D-N.Y.) won hearty applause when he told the House that Congress has power to demand that it be given a say on base closings and should exercise it.

Confirmed Segregationist

RIVERS, WHO WILL be 60 next month, has served in Congress for 25 years. After his bolt to Sen. Strom Thurmond in 1948 and to Gen. Eisenhower in 1952, he returned to the fold and campaigned hard for President Johnson last year.

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